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SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA ASKS: "WHY NOT US FOR OBAMA INTERVIEW?"

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH E. LEBARON, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- Al Jazeera executives want to know why POTUS chose Al Arabiya for his first interview. No matter its reputation in the United States, one board member argued, Al Jazeera has by far the largest audience reach in the region.

-- Pressed by PAO about Qatar's blatant use of Al Jazeera as a political tool during the Gaza crisis, the board member acknowledged that "some Qataris had been asking if the government's actions in this regard were in the long-term interest of the country."

-- Another board member asked if Washington was aware that Al Arabiya was viewed by regional audiences as "pro-regime," so if the intent was to send a message of change from the previous administration, the argument fell on deaf ears, the board member said.

-- Al Jazeera Director General Wadah Khanfar reportedly ordered Al Jazeera English to stop broadcasting excerpts of the Al Arabiya interview because nothing the President said was "newsworthy," although this ban appeared to be lifted on February 1. Al Jazeera Arabic provided little coverage of the interview.

(C) COMMENTS

-- That Al Jazeera employees are miffed over Al Arabiya's scoop is no surprise. Even these pro-U.S., pro-reform contacts high within the Al Jazeera structure have a hard time understanding that they cannot have their cake and eat it, too, i.e. Al Jazeera cannot expect to use its exclusive position in Gaza to run biased coverage and then expect the new Administration to usher in a new relationship with the station due only to its dominant market share.

-- At the same time, Al Jazeera remains the 800-pound gorilla in the media market, and, as the Saudis have shown, dealing with its Al Thani keepers strategically is key to moderating its more egregious coverage. Embassy will offer its thoughts on such a strategy septel.

END KEY POINTS AND COMMENTS

11. (C) Ahmed al-Kholaiifi, Managing Director of Al Jazeera's Board of Directors, told PAO on January 29 that he was encouraged by the message conveyed by President Obama during his interview on Al Arabiya. A graduate of U.S. universities, Kholaiifi said he was "really rooting for America." He added, "I just have to ask, though, why not Al Jazeera?"

12. (C) PAO explained that he did not have specific guidance

from Washington on the choice of stations, but asked Kholaiifi if he thought it made sense for the President to appear on Al Jazeera after its wall-to-wall, extremely graphic coverage of the Gaza incursion. PAO added that the Gaza coverage had laid bare once and for all the tight relationship between Qatar and Al Jazeera, which very clearly was using the station as a political tool to pressure the Saudis and Egyptians. Al Jazeera, PAO stated, was becoming part of the news, not a reporter of the news.

13. (C) Kholaiifi admitted that "there are some Qataris who are questioning the wisdom of the government's actions" with regard to Gaza, and "asking if they are in the long-term interests of the country." In the short-term, he stated, everyone agreed that something had to be done and supported the Amir's active diplomacy. He added that he thought Al Jazeera employees were taking their cues from the Amir's actions, but not receiving direct instructions from the government.

14. (C) "No matter what you thought of our Gaza coverage," Kholaiifi continued, "the U.S. Government should put its voice on Al Jazeera, because we are the station that Arabs are watching."

15. (C) Another Al Jazeera board member, Abdulaziz al-Mahmud, also a U.S.-educated reformist, asked if Washington decision makers were aware that Al Arabiya is viewed as a pro-government propaganda channel, whereas Al Jazeera has credibility with "ordinary Arabs." If the President's intent was to communicate with the Arab street, he said, then his message has fallen on deaf ears, because

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"nobody watches Al Arabiya."

16. (C) The Senior Interview Producer for Al Jazeera English, who is not Qatari, said that all of her colleagues at the station were trying to piece together the message that President Obama was trying to send to Al Jazeera by choosing its main competitor. "We all want him to succeed," she explained, "but he's not doing any good going on a channel that maybe 10 percent of viewers watch."

17. (C) Challenged by PAO to cite the journalistic standards behind the reason for not showing excerpts of the interview on Al Jazeera, the producer noted that Al Jazeera English had in fact run several clips, but then was forced to pull them when Director General Wadah Khanfar intervened. His reasoning, she stated, was that the President said "nothing newsworthy" in the interview. Al Jazeera Arabic, according to contacts, ran few excerpts. (NOTE: Al Jazeera English began running excerpts again on the morning of February 1. END NOTE)
LeBaron